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SUBJECT: KARBALA PRT MEETS WITH SADRIST PC MEMBERS

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

12. (S) SUMMARY: On May 8, PRT met two Sadrists members of the Karbala Provincial Council (PC). The Sadrists had only recently returned to the Council after warrants for their arrests were withdrawn. The Sadrists warned of Iranian influence in south-central Iraq; described the Karbala political structure; deflected to all others in the region blame for JAM related violence; offered excuses for Muqtada al-Sadr's presence in Iran; requested U.S. assistance in the empowerment of the moderate wing of the Sadrists movement; and asked for U.S. financial support. END SUMMARY.

13. (S) On May 8, PRT met at the REO Hillah with two Sadrists members of the Karbala PC: Ali Abbas Gzawi (Strictly Protect) and Ahmed Redha Gareeb (Strictly Protect) to discuss matters related to the Provincial Council Tourism Committee and a potential QRF project. Ali Abbas has met with the PRT on previous occasions but only to discuss Council matters. In a surprise turn of events, the meeting was devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the Sadr party and related issues.

BACKGROUND: SADRIST HISTORY ON THE PC

14. (S) There are three Sadrists members currently active on the Karbala Provincial Council: Ali, Ahmed, and Jasim Wahab Mohammed. Five Sadrists were seated in the last provincial elections and one of the five, Jawad Kadhum Husain Al-Hasnawi, was elevated to Deputy Governor. After the Shabania attacks in Karbala at the end of August 2007, arrest warrants were issued by the Higher Judicial Council for all five of the Sadrists PC members in Karbala. One member, Hamid Ganoosh Jasim, was arrested and the other four fled. GOI officials in Baghdad later determined that the warrants had been "fraudulently" obtained. Ali Abbas and Ahmed report that Hamid Ganoosh remains in detention, the other three PC members have now returned to Karbala while the Deputy Governor remains in Baghdad. The PRT had previously been informed that the PC had requested a ruling from the Higher Juridical Council as to whether the PC could elect a new Deputy Governor given Jawad Kadhum Husain Al-Hasnawi's prolonged absence from Karbala Province.

WARNINGS OF IRANIAN PLOTS

15. (S) Ali and Ahmed said they wanted the U.S. to be aware of Iranian plots to control south-central Iraq. They cautioned that Iran is very dangerous and the cause for the violence in Iraq. Ali and Ahmed claim that they want to be rid of Iran so Iraq can be ruled by Arabs, emphasizing that Iraq is Arab and has no ethnic or historic ties to Iran. They said that Iran's immediate objective in Karbala is to control the two shrines in the city center. Ali and Ahmed described an array of alleged Iranian sympathizers in Karbala who are allegedly involved in this plot, including: the Himaiatt al Harmain (protectors of the two shrines in Karbala) who are said to hold stockpiles of weapons in the

shrines, and the tourism companies and hotel owners that cater to Iranian pilgrims. (Note: In a May 7 meeting, the head of a Karbala-based trade association of hotels, restaurants, and tourism complained that his industry was suffering severely due to an Iranian-imposed limit of only 1,500 visitors per month to Karbala. End Note.)

A SADRIST VIEW OF THE KARBALA POLITICAL STRUCTURE

16. (S) The Sadrists divided the Karbala political powers into two groups. The first group, the "power holders" occupy 21 seats on the Provincial Council and hold most high offices in the Province. The core of this group is Karbala residents with long ties to the area and links to Iran, including members of the marja'iyya, Da'wa, and ISCI. The second group, identified as the "independents" (as in independent of Iran), is comprised of the tribal Arabs who moved to Karbala in the past 50 years and who now support the Sadrists, Fadhila, and other groups.

17. (S) The Sadrists claim that the power holders comprise only ten percent of the population but through the influence of the marja'iyya and the closed election lists were able to manipulate the election results to take a majority of the Council seats. The Sadrists see the Da'wa governor as one of the power holders but consider the council chairman an independent. The Sadrists called the good relationship between the governor and the chairman a "mystery." (Note: The relationship of the governor and the chairman is sometimes strained but both appear committed to a unified public image. The chairman is a skilled conciliator who has survived a

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number of challenges to his chairmanship. End Note.)

EXCUSES OFFERED FOR MUQTADA AL SADR'S ABSENCE

18. (S) PRToffs pointed out the inconsistency between the Sadrism condemnation of Iran and Muqtada al Sadr's residence in Iran. They agreed that Sadr's presence in Iran is very harmful to the Sadrism cause in Iraq, but insisted that Sadr has no choice in the matter, claiming that Da'wa, ISCI, and others excluded Sadr from the Iraqi political scene and forced him to take refuge in Iran. They said that Iran decides when and if Sadr can leave Iran.

19. (S) Asked to define the Sadrism political agenda, Ali and Ahmed responded with several frank admissions: first, they confided that even "good Sadrists" are of two camps, the well-educated with open minds and the uneducated with closed minds. The second group controls the party leadership. They also confided that the Sadrists were not prepared for the past elections as they did not understand the concepts of democracy or freedom and they lacked the party leadership to develop a proper platform. They claim to enjoy popular support on the streets and believe that the moderates can pursue a positive agenda if they are not driven from the party by the rogues. Ali and Ahmed claim that their party leadership is improving and moving beyond a focus on raw power to consider larger social issues. They identified the current party leadership in Karbala as Sheikh Muhaned Al-Assadi, who they state was designated for this position by the Sadrism officials in Najaf. (Note: Karbala media have identified Sheikh Abdul-Hadi Al-Mohammadawi as the head of the Al-Sadr office in Karbala. End Note.)

GOI, IRAN, and U.S. RESPONSIBLE FOR JAM VIOLENCE

110. (S) Ali and Ahmed said they are displeased with the violence in Baghdad and Basra but insisted that the Government of Iraq, the U.S., and the rogue Sadrism elements all share the blame for the present situation. They explained that Sadr's two freezes on armed conflict were

intended by Sadr to highlight the rogue elements in his movement. The loyal Sadrists expected that Iraqi and Coalition forces would help the Sadrist cause by eliminating those rogue elements. Instead, they claim, the Iraqi and Coalition forces used the freeze to attack all Sadrists, good and bad alike, as part of a politically motivated campaign to destroy the Sadr party. Ali and Ahmed contend that the Iraqi and Coalition forces were baited in this matter by Iran who supplies considerable arms to the rogue Sadrist elements to heighten the tensions between the Sadrists and the GOI. They claimed that acts of violence and intimidation directed against the moderate Sadrists (including the attempted arrest of the five elected Sadrists in Karbala) only serve to legitimize and strengthen the rogue elements of the Sadrist party and undermine the moderate Sadrists and their calls for peace and dialogue.

ASSISTANCE REQUESTED FROM THE U.S.

¶11. (S) Ali and Ahmed want the U.S. to act to ensure the "independents," i.e. moderate Sadrists, are not excluded from the political process. They warned that excluding the Sadrists would open the door for total Iranian control in Karbala and all Iraq. They asked the U.S. to intervene to stop an alleged GOI campaign of harassment and intimidation intended to prevent Sadrists from effective participation in the provincial election process. They claim the Sadrist offices are under Iraqi guard, citizens are discouraged from attending the Sadrist political gatherings, and moderate Sadrists are publicly labeled as criminals and harassed. As evidence, they cited a recent bombing in Karbala which they claim resulted in the unjustified, mass arrest and detention of 180 Sadrists. Ali and Ahmed suggested that U.S. intervention should include empowerment of the tribes in south central Iraq. (Note: The Karbala Governor, whom the Sadrists claim is a puppet of Iran, is willing to engage the tribes in political dialogue but is adamantly opposed to using the tribes in any security role. End Note.)

PM'S THREAT TO EXCLUDE SADRISTS FROM PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

¶12. (S) PRToffs asked Ali and Ahmed about the Prime Minister's threat to exclude the Sadrists party from the election process. They responded that the PM is motivated by his personal desire to strengthen the Da'wa party and that any attempt to exclude the Sadrists from the election process would result in the fall of the Maliki government. PRToffs explained their desire to reach out to all groups to encourage broad participation in the Iraqi political process,

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agreeing that the exclusion of groups from that process will only serve to undermine the very democracy the Iraqis are trying to build. Ali and Ahmed stated in response that "in the name of God" they encourage the U.S. to reach out to the Sadrists to empower the moderate wing of the party.

REQUEST FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

¶13. (S) The Sadrist requested QRF funding for an NGO, "The Iraqi Social Association," which was registered with the GOI in June 2006. They said the NGO is nonpartisan and provides a variety of social services to the poor, women, orphans, and other marginalized groups. They said the group's rent had previously been paid by Ahmed Chalabi, but Chalabi will no longer cover the rent for their building because the NGO would not support Chalabi's political demands. The PRT will consider this project as a candidate for QRF funding and will hold further meetings with the Sadrists to discuss this matter, among others.

¶14. (S) Comment: This first engagement with Sadrists officials was remarkably free of polemics. While Ali and

Ahmed represent the smaller, intellectual (and anti-Iranian) wing of the party, we see this as an excellent foot in the door for the PRT. We will also give serious consideration to a QRF project, presuming it meets all the requirements and is truly apolitical, as a way of building confidence and demonstrating our desire that the Sadrists find legitimate ways to express their aspirations in the political process.

End Comment.

CROCKER